

# Against all militarism

## Why an antimilitarist perspective is important for all social movements

The World Social Forum is now 6 years old. Since the beginning in Porto Alegre in 2001, it grew, it inspired regional processes, and it changed. With the success of the World Social Forum came interest from the traditional left, and from leftist governments. Brazil's president Lula spoke at the World Social Forum, and the Venezuelan government instrumentalised the "polycentric" forum in Caracas to promote the "Bolivarian revolution". So is the WSF embracing old-fashioned traditional left politics, and does it abandon its own principles? Does the WSF fall into the old trap of opposing one side of the political spectrum – (US) imperialism – and turning a blind eye on human rights violations and militarism when they occur on the left side of the political spectrum, according to the simple principle "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"?

### The principles of the World Social Forum

The Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum [1] goes back to 2001. The first paragraph of this charter sets out the basis of the WSF: *"The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth."*

Paragraph 5 states: *"The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world"*, and it thus excludes governments and militaries. Paragraph 9 even spells it out, though a bit weaker: *"Neither party representations nor military organizations shall participate in the Forum. Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity."*

Paragraph 10 is about important values: *"The World Social Forum is opposed to all totalitarian and reductionist views of economy, development and history and to the use of violence as a means of social control by the State. It upholds respect for Human Rights, the practices of real democracy, participatory democracy, peaceful relations, in equality and solidarity, among people, ethnicities, genders and peoples, and condemns all forms of domination and all subjec-*



European Union force (EUFOR) presents its dissuasion force in Kinshasa, DRC, 20 July 2006. 2000 EU troops provided additional support to MONUC during the electoral period. © MONUC Photo/Romain Desclous

*tion of one person by another."* And paragraph 13 mentions as one of the objectives to "strengthen and create new national and international links among organizations and movements of society, that – in both public and private life – will increase the capacity for non-violent social resistance to the process of dehumanization the world is undergoing and to the violence used by the State".

The Bamako appeal [2], which is somewhat a departure from these principles, was passed at the polycentric WSF in Mali in January 2006. The Bamako appeal is full of the old-fashioned rhetoric of the left, and puts a special emphasis on the working class – in fact, it almost seems as if the term "civil organizations" used in the Charter of Principles disappeared from the language of the Bamako appeal. For example, the Bamako appeal uncritically calls for widening "the solidarity campaigns with Venezuela and Bolivia, since these are places where people are building new alternatives to neoliberalism and crafting Latin-American integration". However, the Bamako appeal recognises "that the failures of the Soviet system and the regimes that arose from decolonization resulted largely from their denial of freedom and their underestimation of the value of democracy. The development of alternatives must integrate this fact and

give pre-eminence to building democracy".

However, most strikingly, in both the original Charter of Principles and in the Bamako appeal, any analysis of militarism in itself is completely absent. Anti-militarism is seen as anti-imperialism, and is limited to opposing US and NATO military action, but does not expand to other actors.

### Why antimilitarism?

In its 1990 statement "Nonviolence and armed struggle" [3], War Resisters' International writes: *"In our view, liberation movements are authentic to the extent that they strengthen popular self-reliance and self-organisation and reflect the aspirations of the excluded. They may contain many different social groups and political tendencies, but they depend on the participation of the powerless."*

*The liberation they seek cannot entail the oppression of others but should respect the rights of all: we are only too aware of the danger that today's liberators could become tomorrow's oppressors."*

*"There is nothing romantic about the experience of war, including revolutionary war. We can understand the reasons for resorting to armed struggle, but we warn against its consequences. No matter how just the cause, no matter how much armed struggle is a method of last resort, warfare de-*

*generates. Discriminating sabotage tends to blur into indiscriminate attacks killing non-combatant civilians and bringing reprisals. Local conflicts erupt into self-perpetuating feuds beyond any political control; violence becomes a pattern for handling conflict."*

*If the military struggle is to bring ultimate victory, then an army is required – an army of soldiers willing to kill to order, operating with firm chains of command, and dependent on weapons suppliers who wish to exploit the struggle, either for political influence or profit. Military necessity comes to take priority over human or social considerations."*

There are plenty of examples, and there is not enough space to analyse them here. So some "snapshots" will need to be sufficient:

- After the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979, the US launched a campaign of low-intensity warfare and supported the contras. As a response, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua introduced conscription, in order to be able to recruit sufficient numbers of youth for a military struggle against the contras.
- The armed independence struggle in Angola since the

### Editorial

*People's Struggles, People's Alternatives* is the theme of the World Social Forum in Nairobi, a theme, which certainly is of relevance to antimilitarists and pacifists. And a theme, that is also very relevant in the African context, where people struggle against neo-colonial exploitation, and against war and violence.

Since the beginning of the World Social Forum process in 2001, antimilitarists and pacifists have remained more on the sidelines of this process, thus missing the opportunity to engage in a debate with movements from all over the world. Certainly, there are differences of opinion, of strategy, and most importantly often a differing view on the use of violence. While we should stand firm in our commitment to pacifism and antimilitarism, we still have a lot to learn from other movements – but also a lot to give.

Nonviolence has a huge repertoire of tools and experience in practicing real grassroots democracy, empowering people, and building alternatives. This experience – often derived from anarchism and feminism – is valuable for the World Social Forum process, which struggles with issues such as participatory democracy, decision making and others. Not that we have all the answers – far from it – but we can contribute our valuable experience.

We think it is now not the time to sit on the fence and criticise the WSF and other movements from a purist perspective. It is time to engage with other movements, to use the space provided by the World Social Forum – not uncritically – in order to be part of the development of new alternatives and new strategies to change the world. Because change – radical, revolutionary change – is needed, if we want to break out of the cycle of violence, poverty, environmental destruction, and potential nuclear overkill.

Andreas Speck & Javier Garate

### The Broken Rifle

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## Global Initiative on War Profiteers

One of the main pillars that supports war and militarism is economics. It is in war times when war related corporations make their big killings.

In Africa this becomes very clear, where the governments that are “promoting peace” for the region, at the same time are facilitating the trade of small arms and the exploitation of natural resources

Illegal small arms pose a major threat to public safety throughout central and east Africa, encouraging crime while fuelling and prolonging conflict. Small arms and light weapons such as assault rifles are especially suited to the irregular warfare that is still widespread in the region because they are cheap, easy to use, widely available and durable. Bladed weapons like machetes have also been widely used in conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi.

Millions of lives have already been lost in the region, and the supply of arms to both governments and rebel groups continue to grow.

In 2000, 10 countries signed the Nairobi Declaration on Small Arms and Light Weapons and in 2002 the East Africa Police Chiefs Committee was formed. The Committee has set up a programme to register and classify firearms. However, ongoing instability presents major challenges for these and other initiatives.

The top three small arms exporters during 2006 were: the United States \$ 533,000,000, Russia \$130,000,000 and China \$ 100,000,000 (Figures in US dollars, Sources: CRS, SIPRI and UN website)

The Control Arms Campaign, founded by Amnesty International, Oxfam, and the International Action Network on Small Arms, estimates that there are over 600 million items of small arms in circulation, and that over 1135 companies based in more than 98 different countries are manufacturing small arms as well as their various components and ammunition. Worldwide, an average of over 500,000 deaths are caused by the use of small arms every year, approximately one death per minute.

The exploitation of natural resources especially of minerals in Africa is also a way of profiteering from war. In many cases these exploitations bring displacement and fuels local conflicts as it happens for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo. You will find a further analysis on this in the article on War Profiteers in Congo in this *Broken Rifle*.

War Resisters' International is developing a Global Initiative Against War Profiteers. With the aim to coordinate and support local campaigns against war profiteers at an international level. At the WSF we will be giving a workshop on war profiteers with a special eye on how to challenge it in Africa.

If you want to know more please contact the WRI office at [info@wri-irg.org](mailto:info@wri-irg.org).

# Revolutionary Nonviolence in Africa: Old Commitments, New Hopes

Collected by Matt Meyer

For advocates of revolutionary nonviolence—the interconnected commitment to radical social change and the strategies and tactics of unarmed “soul force”—the history and contemporary struggles throughout the continent of Africa provide rich example of great hope.

From the early Pan-Africanist movements, when Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah was described as the Gandhi of Africa, to the successes of the anti-apartheid movement, to grassroots women’s groups currently fostering conflict resolution and dialogue, the continent derivatively called “dark” a century ago and popularly seen as nothing but “war-torn” today in fact has more examples of positive, pacifist action than most places on the planet. In the forthcoming Africa World Press two-volume collection *Seeds of New Hope: Pan African Peace Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (2008, edited by J. Atiri and M. Meyer, see [www.africaworldpress-books.com](http://www.africaworldpress-books.com)), academics and activists have come together to document and discuss this burgeoning movement. Below are some excerpts from a selection of essays, which also include work from WRI’s own Jorgen Johannsen, Chesterfield Samba, Jan Van Crikinge, Koussetogue Koude, and Marianne Ballé Moudoubo, as well as from Silvia Federici, Yash Tandon, IPRA’s Bernadette Muthien, Transcend’s Rais Neza Boneza, Joseph Sebarenzi, and Elavie Ndura.

At the time of the liberation movements, there certainly was a lot of hope, yet there were also

the seeds of the troubles to come, as leaders relied too heavily on the same methods and tactics that the colonial rulers had employed. Today, there are still a lot of troubles. Yet, time and time again—in conversations with grassroots activists, at conferences with professors and alternative economists, and in the presentations contained in this volume—we see the seeds of new hope. My own hopes for Africa today center around the belief that we will overcome the limitations that occur when people become seduced by power.

My hopes and expectations are that, once again, people’s movements will flower. Only in this way will we be able to achieve a real people’s democracy.

—Pan African elder and WWII Conscientious Objector Bill Sutherland

African women are pioneering peace initiatives, mixing in innovative ways the latest research and theories in nonviolent conflict resolution and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. They are often reinterpreting the latter, adapting traditions to contemporary problems and expanding women’s roles. African women play many roles in conflict: as victims, as perpetrators, and as leaders in preventing, ending, and healing the wounds of conflict. . . African women’s peace initiatives range from initiating dialogue between enemy groups, as in the underground networks established by women from northern and southern Sudan; to mobilizing whole sectors of communities to prevent violence, as the women of the Wajir Peace Group do in northern

Kenya; to identifying new challenges to peace, such as the work on HIV/AIDS and conflict undertaken by Femmes Africa Solidarité; to reintegrating child soldiers back into civilian society, as done by the women of Jamii Ya Kupatanisha in Gulu, Uganda. They are healing the wounds of war, as Pro Femmes/Twese Hamwe in Rwanda are attempting in building Peace Villages where Hutu and Tutsi widows and orphans role model living together. In so doing, African women are reinterpreting tradition and expanding the public space for women.

—International Fellowship of Reconciliation officer Shelley Anderson

After the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998-2000, which claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides and maimed and disfigured many youngsters, displaced thousands of civilians, and consumed the national treasury, the number of conscientious objectors increased. Currently, thousands of Eritreans object to military service. They are forced to leave Eritrea and live in exile. Considerable numbers of them are in Libya, Ethiopia, Sudan, and parts of Europe seeking political asylum. In Eritrea, conscientious objection is taboo. Conscientious objectors are considered cowards lacking patriotism. There is no alternative civilian service. Deser-  
tion is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, and in wartime the punishment includes the death penalty. Due to its militaristic nature, the government does not tolerate independent NGOs, human right groups, international observers, or reporters. . . But we

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1960s lead to political independence in 1975, but was immediately followed by a civil war, that lasted until 2002. In this war, outside actors – apartheid South Africa, the USA, and the Soviet Union and Cuba, which sent its military to support the MPLA – played an important role.

► Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia after decades of armed struggle by the EPLF which ended in 1991. However, since formal independence in 1993, Eritrea has embarked on a policy of militarisation and human rights violations. All Eritrean youth – boys and girls – are subject to military service prior to leaving school, and penalties for draft evasion or desertion include torture, death, imprisonment, and even imprisonment of relatives.

This list could be extended.

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez demanded in 2005 that the WSF needs to “add a strategy of power” to its agenda [4]. I don’t agree with Chavez very often, but here I do. But a strategy of power requires an analysis of power, and in this analysis antimilitarism differs greatly from Chavez’ populist anti-

imperialism.

Power is central. Power not only in the sense of power over – the power of one group of people to dominate another group of people (structural violence). An understanding of power is also crucial to fight power over and violence: power with as the power of people acting together in co-operation, to achieve things they won’t be able to achieve on their own; and power to do something, based on skills, knowledge, conviction. An analysis of power needs to include an analysis of the state.

According to Gustav Landauer, “*the State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.*” [5] This is even more important for anti-militarists. Landauer puts it quite bluntly: “*War is an act of power, of murder, of robbery. it is the sharpest and clearest life expression of the state. The struggle against war is a struggle against the state; whoever gets involved in politics of the state, even from the standpoint of revolution, is a party to the war.*”

**The World Social Forum and antimilitarism**

The Charter of Principles of the

see that refusing military service paves the way for peace. We need democracy and the rule of law. The people of Eritrea are in a political, social, and economic crisis. We urgently need a healthy democratic political atmosphere, a constitutionally elected leadership, and a multiparty political system. There is also an urgent need for the release of all political prisoners and conscientious objectors. The ideas and teachings of conscientious objection are pacifist in nature.

They are based on humanity and morality. We believe that they can stand against the deceiving, confusing propaganda of national unity and national sovereignty, which are devastating and always provocative.

—Eritrean Anti-Militarist Initiative co-founder and CO Yo-  
hannes Kidane

If perhaps people had come to Africa and had shared the resources equitably, perhaps we would never have had the conflicts that we have. But they were not shared equitably. Anywhere in this world, unless we learn to share resources equitably we are not going to enjoy peace.

Unless we learn to respect other people’s human rights—women’s rights, environmental rights—we won’t know peace. We even go must beyond that and say that there are others who live on this planet besides us, the human species. We have the other species, and they too have a right to be respected. Only then can we begin to live peacefully.

—Green Belt Movement founder and 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai

one person by another.”

In its 1990 statement, WRI writes: “*There may be times when it seems that nonviolence has failed. However, we are convinced that, if active nonviolence brings repression, armed struggle will provide a pretext for even more ruthless repression. If active nonviolence cannot bring change rapidly, no other form of popular resistance will bring victory in the short term. A new strategic framework will be needed, based on building up the confidence and cohesion of the people through activities rooted in local communities.*” [6]

We are convinced that a perspective of nonviolence and antimilitarism is crucial for all social movements engaged in the social forum process.

Andreas Speck

## Notes:

- 1 [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2)
- 2 [http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=66](http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=66)
- 3 <http://wri-irg.org/statemnt/libstrug.htm>
- 4 <http://www.ipsterraviva.net/TV/WSF2005/viewstory.asp?idnews=170>
- 5 Gustav Landauer, *For Socialism*. St Louis, Missouri, 1978 (German: Berlin 1911)
- 6 <http://wri-irg.org/statemnt/libstrug.htm>

# CONGO (DRC) and War Profiteers

## A tragedy forgotten by the global peace movement?

After decades of colonialism, dictatorship and wars, on 6 December 2006, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) swore in its first fair and freely elected president since independence from Belgium in 1960, Joseph Kabila.

The six-year civil and international war in Congo that has killed more than four million people and displaced another two million may have 'officially' ended, but the dying has certainly not. Every day in Congo, a deadly combination of conflict-related atrocities (in which rape is widely used as a weapon by all parties involved), starvation, poverty and disease kills over 1,200 people. This conflict is for sure one of the most under-reported human tragedies of our lifetime, yet it is one of the most lethal since World War II. Decades of unrelenting violence, poverty, and disease have created what the United Nations has called the greatest humanitarian challenge now facing the world.

Congo has a long history of plunder and war profiteering. Extremely rich in cobalt, diamonds, copper, gold and other rare minerals, Congo attracted the interest of the European imperialist powers only at the end of the 19th century. At the Conference of Berlin (1884–1885) the then Belgian king Leopold II succeeded in getting recognition for his claims over this enormous territory. In his personal name, the king created the so-called 'Congo Free State', in which a brutal exploitation of wild rubber, ivory and timber wood started soon. It is said that nearly half of the population of the Congo Bassin disappeared between 1880 and 1920 as a direct or indirect result of this ruthless colonial plunder.

Congo gained independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960 under president Kasavubu and the charismatic and popular prime minister Patrice Lumumba. There followed a period of great instability and foreign military intervention, including by the United Nations. The mineral-rich provinces of Katanga and South Kasai, with the active support of colonial companies and mercenaries, soon even declared their independence. In 1965 it was finally army colonel Joseph Mobutu's second coup d'état that marked the beginning of a 32 years rule by a western-backed dictator – he changed his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko and that of his country in Zaire. Mobutu and the elite around him plundered the nation's wealth so deeply that the corrupt system became commonly known as a 'kleptocracy'. This system collapsed in May 1997 when the troops of lifelong rebel Laurent-Désiré Kabila, Joseph's father, helped depose the already terminally ill Mobutu.

L-D 'Mzee' Kabila could only seize power in Congo with the massive military support of Rwanda and Uganda and the use of child soldiers. On August 1998, Rwanda and Uganda backed a rebellion against L-D Kabila's weak and corrupt government – a war dubbed "Africa's First World War" because of its similarities with what happened in Europe in 1914: nearly all the neighbouring countries and many armed non-state groups

from the Congo as well as from other 'internal' wars of the Africa Great Lakes region (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan). Troops mainly from Zimbabwe, Namibia, Chad and Angola secured the Kabila regime's survival, whereas Uganda's Museveni and Rwanda's Kagame were the primary backers of the rebellion. Rwanda justified intervention in Eastern DRC by security concerns over Interahamwe rebels based in that part of the country. But there were also very important economic motivations behind Rwanda's and Uganda's actions.

In January 2001, L-D Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguards in circumstances that remain unclear, leaving his son Joseph in power.

The war bore destructive effects on the already very weak political structures, especially the de facto division of the country between the western and southern parts, controlled by the Kabila government and its allies, and large territories in the north and the east occupied by various rebel organisations, militias and intervening armies from the neighbouring countries. Infighting and power struggles about the control of the mineral wealth within the respective territories in the rebel held parts have resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. Almost 90% of the war victims are civilians, mostly victims of starvation, disease and criminal violence as a result of the complete lawlessness. Rape has been widely used as a weapon in this war.

Although a peace deal signed in 2004 under South African auspices supposedly ended the 'conventional' war, fighting continues in the east of the country between rebel militia, the Congolese army and UN MONUC-forces, causing many civilian casualties.

Since the start of the transitional government in June 2003, armed groups linked to neighbouring countries and corrupt Congolese government officials have continued illicit economic exploitation in the country. A three-year investigation by a Panel of Experts, convened by the United Nations Security Council in 2000, found that sophisticated networks of high-level political, military and business persons in cahoots with various rebel groups were intentionally fueling the conflict in order to retain their control over the country's natural resources. In a series of controversial reports, the Panel exposed the vicious cycle of resource-driven conflict that has taken hold of Congo.

*"There's a worldwide profit interest that the present plundering mechanism stays in place. There are an enormous number of people siphoning off Congo's resources. ... There's the Congo government elite, all kinds of European and North American firms, a huge number of African firms, and especially the elites from neighbouring countries. It's a very vast and complex network profiting from the war and its exploitation."*

In its October 2002 report, the Panel also accused dozens of western companies of violating a set of government-backed international standards for responsible corpo-

rate behaviour known as the 'Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises'. An April 2004 report by RAID (Rights & Accountability in Development), examined the UN Panel's allegations against 40 companies and included additional evidence attesting to the companies' involvement in human rights violations, corruption and/or illegal resource exploitation. Most OECD governments refused to investigate the Panel's allegations and in the face of their inaction, international NGOs started to file complaints and public awareness campaigns under the name 'No Blood on my Cell Phone', concerning the plunder of the very rare mineral coltan. About a dozen complaints alleging violations of the OECD 'Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises' were submitted to the American, Belgian, British, and Dutch governments.

*"The government of the DRC must act promptly on the recommendations of a Congolese parliamentary investigation that uncovered illegal natural resource exploitation and profiteering from armed conflict"*, said a leading group of international human rights, environmental and aid organisations in July 2006.

In June 2005 the Lutundula Commission, a special Congolese National Assembly commission led by the courageous parliamentarian Christophe Lutundula, submitted a report on its investigations into mining and other business contracts that rebels and government authorities signed between 1996 and 2003. It found that dozens of contracts are either illegal or of limited value for the development of the country and it recommends their termination or renegotiation. It further recommends judicial action against a number of senior political and corporate actors involved in these operations. *"For years, Congo's politicians have struck deals that enrich themselves but provide no benefit to the Congolese public. Profits from such deals have often come at the cost of enormous suffering and loss of human lives"*, said the coalition of NGOs.

The Lutundula Commission report draws attention to the ongoing illegal exploitation and

recommends an immediate moratorium on the signing of new contracts until after the elections. While carrying out the investigation, some members of the commission were threatened and they found politicians, officials, and company executives unwilling to answer questions. Officials from the United Nations and the Belgian Senate, both of which had investigated natural resource extraction in the Congo between 2000 and 2003, withheld important information regarding some of the illegal deals, citing concerns over confidentiality.

In its report, the commission corroborates the central findings of the UN Panel of Experts and other investigations, which concluded that belligerents were motivated by their desire to exploit Congo's mineral and economic wealth. Belligerents used some of their profits to finance further military operations that often involved widespread human rights abuses against civilians and violations of international humanitarian law.

*"The message of war and transition in Congo is that violence works. Without a firm response, the destructive effects of this lesson are very likely to be felt for a long time to come"*, explains Timothy Raeymaekers, a researcher working for the University of Ghent 'Conflict Research Group'. The author sees opportunities in improving the living conditions of the Congolese population by countering the systematic exploitation of Congo's resources by a small but powerful elite. They give concrete recommendations in the field of agricultural reform, the mining sector and economic integration. Plundering from illegal mining by government officials and the irregular militias has been running into billions a year. *"This is money that must be used for the benefit of the Congolese people"*.

Jan van Crikinge

A longer version with sources has been published in WRI's warprofiteers-news email newsletter, available at <http://wri-irg.org/pubs/warprof-0612.htm>

## The Right to Refuse to Kill

Since the founding of War Resisters' International in 1921, the right to refuse to kill – conscientious objection – has been at the core of WRI's work. Although this right to today recognised as an international standard, it is in practice often not granted, and those who claim their right are thrown into prison, or worse (see for example the article on Eritrea in this *Broken Rifle*).

War Resisters' International supports conscientious objectors and deserters wherever they are. The focus of the work is supporting groups and movements of objectors in their struggle for the recognition of their right. International Conscientious Objectors' Day – 15 May – is used every year to highlight a particular struggle. In 2007, the focus is on conscientious objectors in Colombia.

In addition, War Resisters' International maintains an email alert system (co-alert) in cases of imprisonment or arrest of a conscientious objector. International solidarity and protest can help to protect a conscientious objector in prison, and in some cases facilitate their release.

War Resisters' International's work for the right to conscientious objection is closely linked to our antimilitarist perspective: to fight against war and the causes of war. For WRI, conscientious objection is not about individuals being exempted from military service, but about furthering the antimilitarist cause to abolish war and militarism. In this, the right to conscientious objection is a tool, but not an end in itself.

WRI's Right to Refuse to Kill programme published a monthly e-newsletter in English, French, and Spanish, with updates on conscientious objection and military service. More information is available at <http://wri-irg.org/co/rrk-en.htm>.

If you have any questions, please contact the WRI office at [info@wri-irg.org](mailto:info@wri-irg.org).

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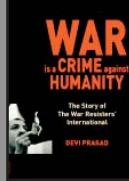
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Remains of the two year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea at point 44 of the temporary security zone, March 2003, UNMEE Photo/J.Aramburu

## Is it ransom or fine? An oddity of legal principle in Eritrea

Thousands of young men and women fled Eritrea and sought asylum in neighbouring countries like The Sudan, Libya, Ethiopia and other countries in Europe and the United States. This even increased after Eritrea's war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 and the open repressive acts of the present government in Eritrea.

Such massive running away of young men and women is part of an effort to avoid conscription or necessary after deserting from the army. According to a proclaimed regulation, national service, compulsory for all men and women aged between 18 and 40, has been extended indefinitely from the original 18 month term instituted in 1994. Besides excessive violations of the human right of draftees, national service consists of military service and labour on army-related construction projects.

The right to conscientious objection to military service is not recognised by the Eritrean authorities. There are frequent round-ups to catch evaders and deserters. Once in the hands of

the army, the deserters face indefinite arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment or at times shooting by their commanders. Those are regularly used methods of punishments for draft evasion, desertion and other military offences in the Eritrean defence force. However, none of these measures stopped the desertion and evasion of those men and women from the military.

The latest measure that the government applied is the detention of parents of deserters and evaders as hostages, and to oblige them to pay money. For a government which depends for its hard currency mainly on remittance, such measures seem to be lucrative. But the hard fact is that most of the evaders have no chance to reach countries where they would be able to send back the ransom money to facilitate the release their detained parents.

The majority of the evaders are staying in neighbouring countries like Sudan and Ethiopia, stranded in refugee camps, and are dependent for their livelihood on international humanitarian and refugee assistance organisations.

According to Amnesty International's news service No. 329, the Eritrean government in December 2006 arrested over 500 relatives, mostly parents, of young men and women who have either deserted the army or avoided conscription. Those arrested were the fathers, mothers or other relatives of men or women over the age of 18 who have either failed to report for national service since 1994, failed to attend the compulsory final school year at Sawa military training camp, abandoned their army unit, or left the country illegally. The relatives have been accused of facilitating their evasion of conscription or flight abroad.

The latest arrests have taken place in the villages of Central Region surrounding Asmara, the capital city, in a sweep that started on 6 December 2006. Ever since it instituted its policy of arresting parents for the alleged crimes of their children, the government has been relying on the reports of the local (zoba) offices to conduct its

raids.

None of those arrested has been charged with a formal criminal offence or taken to court within the 48 hours stipulated by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea. The authorities have stated that the detainees must either produce the missing conscripts or pay a fine of 50,000 nafka (approximately US\$1,200) for each missing child. If they refuse to comply or pay the money, they face indefinite prison terms. Some families could be obliged to pay for two or three of their missing children.

Similarly, in July 2005 several hundred relatives of people who have evaded or deserted from military conscription were detained in the Southern region of Eritrea (Deubub Region). They were held incommunicado, many in harsh conditions, and were at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

The Eritrean Antimilitary Initiative has been denouncing the unlawful arrest of parents of the military evaders. Our initiative believes that the principle of individual penal responsibility, that no one may be penalised for an act for which they are not personally liable, is a fundamental principle of law which is reflected throughout international human rights law. These arrests of parents of military evaders violate this principle, and specifically the right to liberty and security of the person and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, to which Eritrea is a party.

Abraham G. Mehreteab

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